

Feed My Sheep

John 21:1-19

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My older sister could be considered a professional concert-goer. She's been to more concerts than most people have been to movies; and when I wanted to hear some live music (probably some horrible pop bands) when I was in elementary school, she volunteered to take me. We've seen all kinds of shows together, and even more apart. We have both always loved music, and we love to hear it live.

So I was quite young when I started to catch on to the concept of an encore. At first I got *very* excited when everyone stood up and cheered at the end of the show, because I really wasn't sure the band was going to come back out, and I wanted to hear more! But pretty soon I became frustrated with the drama of it all. "Why don't they just go ahead and play everything they have prepared at once?" I asked. "Do they really need to feed their egos by waiting for the crowd to go crazy so they can come back out?" But I would still get a little nervous about it – nervous enough to be one of the crowd-members going crazy, hoping the band would come back.

And later, I realized how silly it is: *of course* they're going to come back out for an encore. They haven't even played their best stuff yet. The encore is regularly the best part of the concert. It's the part you most wanted to hear: the classic songs, the sing-alongs, the unplugged acoustic sets. It wouldn't just be a shorter concert without the encore: it wouldn't be as good. You'd be missing something significant.

And this story today from John's gospel is an encore. The gospel could have ended in chapter 20: "...These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." That would be a great place to end! But the story keeps going. And we are better for it.

Here we find a big group of disciples, at least seven of them, and they are sitting around near at the Sea of Tiberius, just hanging out. And while this whole scenario with Peter seems a little random, it also makes sense. Remember that the disciples have just had some of the most intense spiritual and physical and emotional days of their lives. Their leader has been killed. And he's risen from the dead. Then he's appeared to them, and now he's gone again. They're unsure of their future: who will they follow? What will they do now? Maybe they're just taking a little time to process. And maybe they're discouraged: it's tough to come down from a roller-coaster experience like they've had. So they go back to the place that's most familiar to them, the place they feel most comfortable: they go back to the sea. But after a while, Peter gets tired of just sitting around, so he announces, "I'm going fishing."

"Okay, we'll go with you," say the other disciples, willing to try just about anything, I bet. Fishing is something they know how to do, anyway; something they can do well. And with Jesus gone, maybe it's what they think they'll be doing from now on, the same thing they did before Jesus arrived. Of course, this one constant in their lives, the one thing they know and love and can do without thinking, doesn't work out the way they might have hoped. They fish all night long, and they catch nothing. You can almost see them sinking lower and asking, "Well what *other* ideas do you have?"

But just as the dawn is breaking on a new day, Jesus appears on the beach. He keeps doing this: he keeps surprising us by showing up. And he yells out to the disciples, “You haven’t caught anything, have you?” Adding insult to injury, they yell back, “No, we haven’t caught anything.” So Jesus instructs them, “Throw your nets on the right side of the boat.” And what do you know, but they catch exactly 153 big, heavy fish, enough that the nets should have torn. Enough that they could barely haul it in.

So Peter, always the rational one, gets dressed and jumps in the lake and swims to Jesus, while the others row the boat back to shore, where Jesus already has a little charcoal fire going with his own breakfast cooking: fish and bread. They knew it was Jesus, though they might have wanted to ask him to make sure – it’s not like they’d seen somebody come back from the dead before – and they all sat down to breakfast together.

As if he needed reminding, maybe that charcoal fire smell brought back to mind the fire around which Peter denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. He had said he’d follow Jesus anywhere, even to death, but that same night he said he didn’t know him, he didn’t follow him, he wasn’t one of his disciples. Can you imagine? Can you imagine the pain, the guilt, the shame of being one of Jesus’ closest disciples and flat out saying you don’t know him when things get tough? As if you needed a reminder of that – and here’s Jesus right next to that charcoal fire, bringing it all back.

So Jesus and Peter take a walk together down the beach, and Jesus cuts right to the chase: “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord.” “Feed my lambs.” “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord.” “Tend my sheep.” “Peter do you love me?” “Lord, you *know* that I love you.” “Feed my sheep... and follow me.”

Scholars pretty much all agree that the three-fold “do you love me” corresponds to the Peter’s three-fold denial. It’s Jesus’ way letting Peter know that he’s forgiven. But it’s important that Jesus doesn’t just say, “Do you love me? It’s okay.” “Do you love me? Don’t worry about it.” “Do you love me? I forgive you.” He doesn’t just want to make Peter feel better. That’s not what forgiveness is about. He wants to show Peter that despite his betrayal, despite his mistakes, despite his unfaithfulness, he is **called**.

Jesus says, “Do you love me? Good. Because I’m giving you my work.” It’s like that scene at the end of Willy Wonka and the chocolate factory: “How do you like the chocolate factory, Charlie?” “I think it’s the most wonderful place in the whole world.” “I’m very pleased to hear you say that, because I’m giving it to you.” Jesus doesn’t just forgive Peter in word – he trusts him with the work of shepherding the sheep, of leading the church, of spreading the gospel. He shows us that his grace is far greater than Peter’s denial, far more important than Peter’s mistakes.

The great Bible scholar N. T. Wright tells a story about having a new friend over for a dinner party – after the party, the friend offered to help wash dishes, so Wright and his wife gave him a towel and asked him to dry. In his excitement about the party, he broke a brand new crystal pitcher – shattered it on the floor. Of course he apologized profusely, and Wright and his wife struggled to tell him, “It’s really okay – it’s just a pitcher, not important,” though of course they were disappointed. The important thing, though, was that the next time the friend came over for dinner, they asked him to wash dishes, and gave him a towel. They didn’t just say, “It’s okay – don’t worry about it.” They gave him a job to do.

The good news here is that Jesus is willing to share his own ministry, to share the shepherding, even with those of us who don't necessarily deserve to be trusted with such work. Whatever we've done in the past, he forgives us. And he gives us work to do – not to *earn* our forgiveness, but as a way to respond to the joy that comes with it. Jesus doesn't try to remove guilt and shame from our lives to make us feel better. Forgiveness is far more important than that. Instead, he gives us his own work to do.

And in us, through Peter, Christ's ministry continues. This encore is where we get assurance that even though Jesus is ascending to the Father, his work will continue in the world: work of sharing God's love, feeding the poor, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and being peacemakers. As this morning dawned, Christ stood on the shore and called to us, called us each by name, inviting us to join in his work, no matter how impetuous or doubtful or cowardly or downright unfaithful we have been in the past. "Do you love me?" he asks. "Then feed my sheep."

Amen.